

## Episode 2x06 – The Price You Pay

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Inara nodded cordially at Mal as he passed her on the catwalk. "You seem cheerful."

Mal offered a devious grin. "Got a good feeling about today. Think we can hawk the Lassiter finally, without needin' your help."

That brought Inara up short. A year hadn't even passed since they had stolen it – had six months even gone by? "Mal, it's still too early to try fencing the Lassiter! It's much too hot!"

Once, she would have couched her words in warm, dulcet tones, choosing each one carefully to avoid his temper. Now she no longer cared. She was too tired to try to keep the peace. She settled for voicing her thoughts in small words she knew he'd understand – not that he would actually listen. Lately, the tides of Mal's trust were even more fickle toward her than toward River.

"And what exactly would a whore know 'bout fencing stolen property?" Mal returned fire. "Seein' as your experience is so vast and all, I'm just burnin' with curiosity." Something was wrong between them – he was aware enough to know that much, but he had no idea what it was or how to deal with it.

"That insult is getting old, Mal," Inara stated, too tired to even talk anymore. She simply turned and walked into her shuttle, firmly shutting and locking the door.

Mal heard the click of the lock engaging and blinked at the door. She'd never done that before. He shook off the unsettling feeling it gave him and let his pride take control. Giving his pride free reign was getting to be a bad habit with him lately, but Mal didn't seem to care all that much.

"Can't fence the Lassiter," he muttered, turning on his heel and storming towards the bridge. "Can't fence the Lassiter! I'll show her can't fence – wouldn't know her elbow from a teacup. Don't nobody tell me what I can and can't do on my own ship!"

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River was sitting quietly on the bridge, watching Wash play with his dinosaurs. "Serenity shall be mine!" the Tyrannosaurus Rex declared malevolently.

"No! I won't let you have her!" the Stegosaurus responded in a high-pitched squeak. "She belongs to Wash!"

"Wash is just a pilot. He will do as I say or be eaten!" the Tyrannosaurus Rex growled.

"No! He loves Serenity!" the Stegosaurus insisted, his voice even higher-pitched as he trembled in fear. "He'll never work for you!"

"Then you and he shall be my dinner!" Wash made the Tyrannosaurus Rex laugh darkly before it brutally lunged for the stegosaurus.

"Your stegosaurus is very brave to bicker with the tyrannosaurus in the face of certain death," River told him. Growing more serious, she added, "I like watching them."

She fell silent again, watching him play. It was daytime; their flying lessons were still hours away, but this was an enjoyable way to pass the time. The playing reminded River of life with Simon before the Academy; it made her feel more like the child she used to be rather than the confused thing she'd been made into.

Wash knew his dinosaur playacting helped settle River's mercurial moods, and was glad to see it make her eyes come alive. It was nice to know he could help the girl out in ways her ridiculously smart brother couldn't. It didn't hurt that she was an appreciative audience, either. He let her watch, even hammed up his play, because he liked seeing that look in her eyes. It was kind of like the look he knew he had when he was flying; really flying, not just coasting through the black. The girl needed her freedom, too.

River watched quietly for a few minutes, laughing appropriately when the stegosaurus was saved from his imminent demise by a kamikaze pterodactyl, until her happy world was interrupted by a psychic influx of sad exhaustion from the direction of the shuttles. It wasn't unexpected; she had grown accustomed to Inara's frustrated sorrows. Today must have been a bad day, though: she could almost taste the salt of the Companion's tears.

"Pride goeth before the fall," she whispered to the dinosaurs and Wash. The pilot broke off his game to give her a curious look, and she gave him a sad smile in return. The spell of happy memories from before the Academy was broken, shattered like Inara's mask of cool indifference. Standing up, River leaned over to kiss the stegosaurus once on his hard plastic head, and then turned to drift from the bridge.

Wash watched her go, her steps eerily graceful. Her eyes were blank again. There had been a spark of life in them a moment ago, but now they were back to dead. It was a little scary, how quickly she could go from happy to haunted. It was a little scary, and a lot sad.

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River passed Mal in the corridor on her way out, her delicate shoulder colliding with his as he marched past her. Oddly enough, he was the one who ended up stumbling, while she stayed solid on her feet. "Wo de ma!" he grunted, straightening up. "You oughta watch where you're goin', Little Witch."

"Pride goeth before the fall," she murmured again, holding his fiery eyes with her placid ones. It was her warning to him, one she knew he wouldn't understand until it was too late. She knew better than most how his trust ebbed and flowed. It was almost impossible to get him to listen with anything other than his ears.

"Uh... sure." Mal decided he really wasn't ever going to get used to the prickle of unease he felt whenever the girl talked to him, especially not when she was fixing him with those scary, blank eyes of hers. When she didn't make any move to walk away, he cleared his throat and bobbed his head at her. "Gotta go." Turning away, he steamed on toward the bridge. He had contacts to wave and an uppity "Ambassador" to prove wrong.

"I'll show her. Can't fence the Lassiter. Will too!" he muttered again, furious beyond reason as he stormed into the cockpit.

"Am I interrupting?" Wash asked, looking up from his dinosaurs.

"Get out," Mal snapped, slinging himself down in the co-pilot's seat.

"And go...?"

"Somewhere that ain't here," Mal snapped, furiously punching at buttons.

"Right." Wash knew what was good for him. He gathered up the dinosaurs and left without another word. It was easier to liken the Captain's state to that of a spoiled child, Wash figured, rather than a hard-edged captain. His ranting was sounding more like River than River was.

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A few hours and a dozen waves later, Mal had found himself a buyer on Muir. He'd had to go through the contact of the contacts of a contact, but he'd done it. Never mind that it had been like pulling teeth to find someone who was willing to handle something as hot as the Lassiter; that didn't mean Inara was right. Just meant buyers were stupid, which was a fact he'd accepted years ago.

The buyer – buyers – were a fine, classy bunch of rubens: straight-laced schoolboy types. Admittedly, he didn't tend to do much business with schoolboy types, but a dynamic man of action such as himself had to be willing to go where ever the job took him, and right now the job was taking him straight to a whopping purse of hard currency. Hell, if these folks were really as green as they seemed over the Cortex, maybe he'd be able to wring a bit of extra coinage out of them; wouldn't that be a nice how-d'y'-do to Inara's unfounded concerns. There was no denying it'd be nice to be rid of the thing; it was burning a hole in his cargo hold.

"First thing I'm gonna do is buy a new Mule," he said with a grin to himself, sitting back in the pilot's chair, lacing his hands behind his head. "A nice, shiny new Mule, with all the bells and whistles. Heck, I ain't even gonna call it the Mule. Gonna call it the Thoroughbred." He rolled the word around in his mouth.

"Yeah, Thoroughbred. Perfect." The warning bells he was ignoring about Inara were drowning out his warning bells about the buyers, and all in all, looked like he had a sweet deal lined up.

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"Tonight's lesson, my dear Fledgling, is vitally important to the survival of any good, hard-working pilot. Do you think you're ready?"

River glanced around the empty galley. "Yes," she affirmed with a sharp nod. "Here?" she added.

"Yes, here." Wash held his arms open wide to encompass the entirety of the room. "This, sweet River, is one of the pilot's most important skills. Can you guess what it is?"

She could, just by reading his mind, but she wanted to hear him say it out loud. "Hiding?" she guessed.

"Precisely," Wash enthused. "One of the duties most vital to a pilot's survival is knowing when to get out of the way so the Captain can rampage in peace. Understood?"

River nodded eagerly. "Yes." She loved these stolen hours with Wash. He treated her like a real girl, not like the broken thing she'd been programmed into, or the fragile porcelain doll Simon saw when he looked at her. Wash treated her like a friend; to the best of her knowledge, outside of Kaylee, she'd never had any friends. It was worth risking Mal's wrath and Simon's worry to have this opportunity to feel like a human being for a few precious hours every night. It was nice, trusting Book and Wash not to expose her, knowing they trusted her enough to let her have this time. She hadn't had anyone she could trust in years before waking on Serenity; at least, no one who wasn't named Simon.

She gestured to the plastic dinosaurs he had lined up at attention on the coffee table. "May we recreate the transition of the Triassic to the Jurassic period again?"

Wash beamed at her. "You bet."

Before they had a chance to match up dinosaurs of competing periods against each other, with Cretaceous dinosaurs acting as referee, Mal came stomping into the common room. He looked like he'd just won the lottery, discovered Atlantis, and been knighted, all at the same time. "Wash, don't I pay you to fly my boat?" the captain asked, slapping the pilot amiably on the back.

Wash shared a curious look with River. "Why, yes, Mal, you do," he said. "When we have money, that is. Nice of you to notice."

"Then what're you doing hiding down here, huh?"

"Your words, and I quote: 'Get out.' I said, 'And go?' And you said, 'Somewhere that ain't here.'"

"Ah, Wash," Mal chuckled, chuffing the man on the shoulder. "Laugh riot, that's what you are. Now get on up to the bridge and keep my boat flying. Got us some buyers for that Lassiter! Program a course for Muir over in the Georgia System." He looked extremely proud of himself, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"Just make sure we get there in one piece, yeah?" He turned his beaming grin in River's direction. "Well hello, Little Witch. You playin' dinos with Wash again?" "Proved wrong, but wrong self. Nothing good comes from wrong," River stated, eyes blank, voice sharp. She could see the happy cartwheels he was turning in his head, pinioning on axes of pride.

"Sure, little River." Mal spoke slowly, as if afraid she was going to launch off into a fresh episode if he talked in sentences of more than three words. "I know nothing good comes from being wrong. Learned it at my mama's knee." He offered her a placating smile that was so ridiculously saccharine she wanted to scream. He was deliberately ignoring the meaning of her words, and she hadn't even garbled them like usual.

"You know nothing. Words you hear, feelings you ignore. Knowledge you forget. Pride kills all." River warned, but she knew she was gone and they'd not hear nor heed. Words were useless now. The tide was out and the ears were shut off.

"Hey, River, you want to help me carry the minions back up to the bridge?" Wash asked, gathering up some of his dinosaurs.

"Now you know to be careful and not let her touch anything while you're up there, right?" Mal warned.

"Yes, because I have an attention span greater than that of a two-year-old," Wash assured him. "Besides, she's just helping me carry. Remember when you taught me how? I'm quite good at it now. Anyway, you interrupted a very tense recreation of the final moments of the Triassic Era as the encroaching forces of the Jurassic Era decimated it. High drama, very powerful stuff. Should be made into a shadow puppet play."

Mal spared a glance in River's direction, which she didn't return. She was too angry with him for ignoring her words. "Well, all right," he begrudgingly agreed. "Just make sure she don't touch anything, *dong ma?*"

"Why not touch?" River snapped, glaring at him. "It'll all end in tears!"

Mal looked about ready to put his foot down and change his mind about allowing her in the cockpit, but Wash intervened. "Isn't that precious?" he said, rubbing her back and giving her a quick hug, like an uncle showing off his favorite niece. "They're so cute at this age, aren't they? Come on, River, let's leave Captain Mal alone for a bit. He's an important guy, lots of important captainy things to do, mustn't waste his time. You take the Triassic, I'll take the Jurassic, we'll split the Cretaceous." Before she could protest, he'd dumped his dinosaurs into her arms and was steering her

bodily up the stairs in the direction of the bridge.

"You did not carry any yourself," she observed with a frown, once they arrived on the bridge together.

"I'll make it up to you," he promised. "But if I didn't get you out of there quickly, he was going to ban you from the bridge for mouthing off to him, and then there'd be no more lessons. Right?"

She grunted in annoyed agreement.

"Right. Yeah, the whole thing I told you about hiding being an important part of a pilot's job?" He made a convoluted gesture back over his shoulder in the direction of the common room. "That's what I mean."

"Hide, hide, he hides from himself," she muttered as they stepped onto the bridge. Without waiting for Wash to help, she started setting up the dinosaurs in precisely the same formation as they'd been on the coffee table. "Hides behind a big wall of righteous self worth. Can't see the forest for the gorram trees."

"You've been hanging around Jayne too much," Wash chuckled. "Don't let Simon hear you swear, okay? Well, no: don't let Simon hear you swear unless I'm in the room, too. Wouldn't miss the expression on his face from that for the world."

Wash hated seeing her change so fast. One minute she was a laughing girl flying a ship in secret, the next she was a little crazy science experiment. He hated how Mal worked her, changing her back from the girl, to the crazy, and back again without ever seeing his affect on her. That was the problem with Mal, as Wash saw it: he too often did what he wanted, not noticing the consequences on the crew. He was more unpredictable than River these days.

"No worries, Wash. The girl is here. Soon she will control more. Growing control, less crazy. Mal means well. His ghosts haunt more, too close, to see clear now. He'll learn again. Just like the girl." River tried to soothe.

Wash smiled, knowing she'd be all right. If she was trying to soothe his nerves, then the sweet girl he knew was on her way back to the surface.

River felt her sour mood melt away as she settled down in the co-pilot's chair. "You'll teach me how to maintain a course?" she asked, tucking her knees up under her chin and curling her tiny feet over the edge of the seat. River loved the peace – the serenity – she found in the stars on this bridge with Wash.

"Huh?" Wash glanced up from where he was toggling switches. "Oh, that. Sure. See this squiggly line here?" He pointed to a display screen. "That's our course, and that big shiny blob? That's Muir. Just make sure the squiggly line keeps heading toward the shiny blob. Easy peasy."

With a grin, he reached out, tapping a few more switches. "What you really need to learn," he said, as if sharing a secret, "is this."

River glanced up as the Cortex screen flickered to life. She furrowed her brow. "Dynamation. Movie style from Earth-That-Was." She identified the process she saw on the screen. Cocking her head to the side, she asked, "How does The Valley of

Gwangi relate to flying Serenity? There are no space ships, only dinosaurs."

"River!" Wash cried, scandalized. "All this time with me and you haven't learned what is and isn't important yet? You wound me."

River giggled as she held the stick and flew Serenity. "They would shoot the scene twice. There is glass painted black to create the-"

"Shhhh! I'm watching!" Wash shushed her. "I don't care how they did it. I mean, knowing how they did it? That's like knowing how Santa delivers presents to families with no chimney."

"Santa is an irrational personification of a charitable concept based in theology."

"Just fly the ship."

"Yes, Wash." River nodded solemnly, smiling.



Morning brought breakfast and the big announcement that they would be spending a few days on Muir.

"Wash has set a course for Muir. We're gonna meet the buyers for the Lassiter and then spend a few days getting some supplies." Mal's hand went up to silence Kaylee's squeal. "And, yes, Kaylee, y'can go do girlie things, shoppin' and all." He didn't wait for Inara to speak. "We will be planet-side for 'bout three days, best I figure. First day, with the meet, we'll be a ways from civilization. We'll meet the buyers, do the swap, then fly to the docks. Wash is gonna put us down at West Piers. We'll refuel and get the food supplies we've been needin' so badly. Next day, y'all can head out shoppin' for what y'need: engine parts, medical supplies, ammo, girl stuff. Whatever. We'll hang out another one for finishin' up supplies and shopping. A short, and I stress short, planet-side vacation."

"You hear that wife? Planet-side vacation!" Wash whooped with joy.

Kaylee squealed and whirled to Inara. "Can you save some time, Inara, and shop with me? We can try on pretty dresses and have tea and look at shoes and buy engine bits and... and...!"

"Breathe, Kaylee. Breathe. I can make time. We'll go wherever you'd like." Inara laughed at her friend's enthusiasm.

"Guns. Ammo," Jayne mumbled wistfully, eyes wide and voice soft, as if he was caressing a fine whore. "Big boots."

"You are one scary guy, Jayne," Wash observed, as he was dragged out of his daydreaming by the look of pure pleasure on the mercenary's face. "You look like someone just gave you a bucket of untraceable, chocolate-covered credits."

"Husband, quit pickin' on Jayne and go fly this ship so we can have our vacation," Zoe reminded Wash with an indulgent look in her eyes.

"Going, wife. In fact, color me gone!" Wash said and was already out the door, heading towards the bridge.

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The storeroom was dark and smoky, lit by a florescent bulb that dangled from a wire above a cluttered, ink-stained desk. Dusty bookcases filled to overflowing with old magazines and moldy periodicals reared up on either side, making the tiny room more claustrophobic than Mal though was entirely necessary. "Kids these days," he muttered. "Always with the theatrics."

"Kind of makes you yearn for the sort of folk who'd just shoot you between the eyes proper," Zoe agreed from behind his right shoulder.

Jayne sneezed and let out a slew of angry Mandarin curses, culminating in, "Ta ma de, thought you said these was schoolboys. Ain't schoolboys s'posed to be clean and all that go se? You muss up the Doc's infirmary any and he goes all pink and squealy."

"Sorry about the mess, lady and gentlemen," a new voice chimed in from somewhere behind the bookcases to the left. All eyes turned in that direction as three young men appeared. They were dressed to the nines in sleek suits that were completely out of place juxtaposed against the dirty storeroom. They lined up behind the desk, the speaker flanked by his two followers. He was pretty enough to be a girl, Mal thought, with pale skin that'd make Simon look like a field worker and blue eyes that Kaylee'd find dreamy.

Mal glared at him. "Don't much appreciate bein' kept waitin'," he pointed out sharply. "We was here on time with the merchandise. You'd better be in possession of the appropriate coin, else we can find us another buyer."

The leader smiled. It was an oily, holier-than-thou kind of smile, and it rubbed Mal in the wrong way. Here was a fellow who thought he could own the whole 'verse if he had enough money in his back pocket. Sad and sorry thing was, he probably could, provided the Alliance held all the deeds of sale.

"I assure you, Captain Reynolds, we have the money," he virtually purred. "Make them show us the Lassiter, Lenny!" the one to his left hissed.

Mal turned his attention in that direction. This one was a pencil pusher if ever he'd seen one: greasy hair, skinny face, glasses that made him look like the unluckiest turtle ever to crawl out of the swamp. He was probably a worrier and a control freak.

"All in due time, Wembley," the boss soothed, but there was an edge to his voice that made Mal smirk. Obviously this one didn't like having his actions questioned by his peons.

"Oh for God's sake, cut the crap, Lenny," the one to his right said, rolling his eyes before giving Mal a bright smile, holding out his hand. "Hi, Ricky Porter. This Greek god of a man next to me is Leonard Leoben III – I can get his autograph for your

nieces, if you want. The one farther down is Wembley Quentin, and yes, his parents named him that. They were cruel people."

Mal took the proffered hand cautiously. "Malcolm Reynolds, captain of Serenity." He nodded over his shoulder at Zoe. "This here's Zoe, my second in command. The ugly one's Jayne."

"I like to kill people," Jayne grunted.

"I bet you do," Ricky said, still grinning. Letting go of Mal's hand, he rubbed his palms together. "Right, let's get this done, yeah? You've got something we want, we've got something you want, yada, yada, lots of masculine posturing – with apologies to Zoe, of course. Why don't we just cut to the chase? I'm guessing that's the Lassiter?" He gestured to the case by Mal's feet.

Mal glanced down, and then back up. "Reckon it is," he concurred. "Presume that's our payment?" He nodded to a briefcase Leonard had carried in with him, which was now sitting atop the desk.

"You presume correctly," Ricky said with a sharp nod. "Now, I'll admit I've only seen this kind of thing in movies, but I think the way this works is, we give you the money, you give us the merchandise? We can play around and feel each other out, act suspicious and confrontational, and so forth? But we're all busy people here and it saves time to just get it done, don't you think?"

If it was at all possible, Mal disliked Ricky even more than Leonard. At least Leonard was a deliberate grease ball. Ricky was the kind of guy who could make you like him before stabbing you in the back.

"Make them show us the Lassiter!" Wembley hissed again, eyeing Mal's group suspiciously.

"Yes, fine." Ricky held out his hands palm upward. "Would you? He's fractious when he hasn't had his nap."

Mal glanced at Zoe, before picking up the carrying case and popping open the lid. "Happy now?" he asked, watching the greedy gleam that sparked up in their eyes as they caught sight of the Lassiter nestled in its foam cushion. "Now how's about you show us the cash?"

Leonard's eyes never left the Lassiter as he flipped open the briefcase and turned it toward them, revealing neat stacks of paper Alliance money.

"Big happy family?" Ricky asked cheerfully.

Mal gave him a withering glare. "Wembley, bring that money over here," he deadpanned, not looking away from Ricky.

"Why me?" the squirrelly young man asked, recoiling.

Mal turned the full weight of his glare in Wembley's direction. "Because you ain't tryin' to make me like you. Which is workin', by the way. Now take the money from Lenny and come and get your laser gun, *dong ma?*"

Grumbling, Wembley gathered up the briefcase, sideling around the desk, holding it out as though he were offering meat to a hungry crocodile. Rolling his eyes, Mal reached out and snatched the case away from the younger man before shoving the carrying case into his hand. "Pleasure doin' business with you boys," he said, handing the briefcase behind him to Zoe. "We're done here. Enjoy your little piece of history."

Turning around, he followed Zoe through the door as Jayne covered their exit. Pausing in the doorway, Mal turned and gave the three men a cursory glance. "Oh yeah. Stay in school." He bobbed his head at them. "Thank you kindly."



While Mal, Zoe and Jayne were doing their crime, Simon had gone with Kaylee into the marketplace and purchased medical supplies and a few engine parts Kaylee needed to stock up on. With the promise of the Lassiter sale, they felt justified in using the last of the coin.

Back on Serenity, it was like fish at feeding time as Mal handed out the crew's shares of the Lassiter sale money.

"Want you all back here by sundown!" Mal barked to be heard over the clamor. "Shut up and give us th'gorram money already!" Jayne griped.

"Yeah, come on, Cap'n!" Kaylee pleaded. "It's already almost noon!"

"And ain't a one of you settin' foot off this boat till Wash lands us nice and proper at the West Docks anyway, so you can bite your tongues and show your captain a bit of respect!" Mal snapped, tapping his foot beside the briefcase.

"I'm layin' down the ground rules and I 'spect you to follow 'em. Been a while since we've had this kind of coin, and it'll probably be a while 'till we have the same again. So, don't go blowin' it all on fripperies, dong ma?"

"Yes, Captain," came the humble chorus from the rest of the crew.

"No puppies!"

"Yes, Captain."

"No authentic Earth-That-Was dinosaur toys!"

"Yes, Captain."

"No cute little budgies you say is stuffed but turns out they're alive and kickin' and end up flyin' round the ship and gettin' sucked into the engine coil!"

"Don't be speakin' ill of the dead, Cap'n!" Kaylee protested, sniffling. "Poor li'l Jimmy."

Mal spared her a stern glare, turning back to the crew at large. "I'm gonna 'spect you all back by sundown, and I don't want t'hear tell of no bar fights, fist fights, food fights, or generalized killin' takin' place in that interim of time. Do I make myself

clear, Jayne?"

"Why you gotta pick me out for?" Jayne whined.

"Cause ain't another member of this crew liable to get into a bar fight, fist fight, food fight, or generalized act of killin' while they're out enjoyin' themselves. Just you."

"Oh."

"Doc, want you and River t'keep your heads down," Mal warned, turning toward Simon. River was idly wandering between old empty crates. "This ain't an Alliance-friendly port, so I don't reckon there's going to be anybody liable to see you, but that don't mean I'm happy lettin' you off the boat with so many folks around. The pair of you stick out like sore thumbs on a man with no fingers."

"Actually, River's... not going with me," Simon supplied nervously.

Mal frowned. "She ain't?"

"No."

"Well how come?"

"Going with Wash," River murmured, drifting up behind Mal before her brother could answer.

"When did this happen?" Mal asked.

Zoe shrugged from her seated position on the stairs. "Girl wanted to go with Wash," she answered honestly. "Didn't see as there'd be any harm in it." An affectionate smile touched her lips. "Might be she'll keep him out of trouble."

"Might be," River sing-songed. She was staring with avid interest at the collar of Mal's shirt.

Mal shifted uncomfortably. "Right," he muttered. "Fine then. Just... be good. Keep a low profile."

River shifted her gaze up from his collar, staring hard at his face. "Mal means bad," she murmured. "And Mal's been very bad indeed. Hubris is the downfall of gods and men."

"She on her meds, Doc?" Mal asked out of the corner of his mouth, eyeing River warily.

River poked him in the arm.

"Ow! What y'pokin' me for?" Mal asked, glaring at her as he rubbed his arm. "Lucidity is not measured in CCs," she protested, before spinning around and stomping up the stairs.

"We're coming up on the West Docks," Wash's voice crackled through the intercom.

"Zoe, can I buy a pony?"

"No, dear," Zoe answered to the air.

"Not even a small one? This place is renowned for their miniatures."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because the Captain says so."

"What if we bought him a pony, too?"

"Wash, what'd I tell you 'bout usin' the 'com for personal chit-chat?" Mal asked.

"That it was wrong, wrong, wrong and I wasn't to do it, except in emergencies."

"Right. Which this ain't."

"And I'd agree with you, if not for this passionate debate about a pony."

"Wash?" Mal groused. "Just hush up and land my ship so my crew can go spend all my money."

Kaylee squealed with delight, flinging her arms around his neck, kissing him on the cheek. "I love my captain!" she said, smiling.

Mal chuckled, patting her back. "Go hand it around, mei mei," he said with a sigh. "I already got it sorted per person."

Beaming, Kaylee peeled herself away from him and picked up the briefcase, scurrying around to hand each crewmember their share of the loot.

"You found a buyer." Mal glanced to the side to find Inara standing by his shoulder. For once, she didn't smell of jasmine. She hadn't been wearing the scent much lately.

"That I did," he said, turning back to the front, watching as Jayne carefully counted through his stack of bills, feeling each one against the side of his thumb. "Bet you weren't expecting that, were you?" He tried not to sound smug. He really tried.

"Well, it's like they say," she conceded. "There's a sucker born every minute." "Damn right," Mal agreed, snickering. "What those boys done paid us for that piece of le se 'bout boggles the mind."

"I was talking about you."

Mal glanced in her direction again, brow furrowing. "*Shen ma?*"

Inara looked at him, her eyes oddly flat. "This is going to come back to haunt you, Mal. It was too easy."

"How's easy a bad thing?"

"Please, Mal. This is Serenity. When has easy ever meant anything good?"

Mal's jaw tightened. "You just can't let it rest, can you?" he growled under his breath. "You just can't trust that I did this right, by myself, without your fancy friends helping out."

"It's got nothing to do with me, Mal," she said softly.

"Like hell it don't!" he exploded. The rest of the hold fell silent as all eyes turned in their direction. Mal glared back. "What're you lookin' at?"

"Mal, I'm just worried about you," Inara soothed.

"Worried about me?" He turned towards her, keeping his voice low but hot. "And when have I ever asked for your worry, huh? You know, few weeks back I thought we'd gotten somewhere between us. Thought we were finally gonna start trusting one another. But you been actin' all manner of strange since the whole thing with that protein go se, and you won't tell me why. So worry? I don't need your worry. I don't need nothin' from you, dong ma? You wanna act like there ain't nothin' wrong here, then fine, I ain't gonna argue. But don't start actin' like everythin's all right, neither."

She blinked at him, momentarily speechless, and he took the opportunity to spin on his heel and march across the bay towards the hatch controls. They'd be landing soon. He had things to do.



Wash landed Serenity at the West Docks, a hotbed of activity of both the legal and illegal variety.

If Book hadn't known they were on Muir, he'd have sworn they'd landed at the docks on Persephone. It even smelled like Persephone. It housed the same type of dodgy folk in tattered, old clothes. He half expected Badger to poke up his head out of the crowd and smirk at them.

He stood at the hatch after they landed, watching the crowd come into view as the ramp opened. The different walks of life moving about in the same place interested him – always had. But this time a face in the crowd caused him to do a double take.

Hodges? Had he really just seen Hodges? This wasn't his normal area of operation!

Book's thoughts flew through his mind. It had been seven years since he had last been in contact with anyone from the Alliance, but could things have changed that much? The only thing Book knew for certain was that he had to stay on Serenity, for now. Maybe in a day's time he'd venture out, but today especially, he was staying put.

He and Zoe watched the crew disembark, going their separate ways. Book felt his trepidation melt away a fraction as Kaylee eagerly tugged on Inara's hand, dragging the Companion into the press of humanity. The crowds parted before them, making way for the elegant woman and her plain friend. The rest of the crew – even Simon,

blessed be to God – melted into the crowd and soon disappeared.

"So, Shepherd, how you fixing to pass the time?" Zoe asked once the last crewmember was out of her sight.

"Well, I wasn't planning on hearing any confessions, but I can make time if you've got one," he answered with a smile.

"Funny, Shepherd. I like that." Zoe laughed. "Was thinkin' more on the lines of an inventory of what we got in the kitchen, and what things we should stock seein' as we finally got the coin to do so well enough. All those herbs and what-not you like using... sure'd be nice to have plenty of 'em for when times get hard, like they always seem to do."

"That sounds like a sensible way to spend a few hours' time," Book agreed, if for no other reason than it would keep him away from this hatch for a while.

People watching had suddenly lost its savor.

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Mal gaped at him for a long second. "Now hang on a minute!" he finally managed to sputter. "This here's my Mu- My ride! Bought and paid for just this morning. Even got the bill of sale!"

"My employer doesn't take kindly to having his merchandise bought with counterfeit money."

Mal's jaw dropped, but Jayne's dropped further. "What kind of money?" the mercenary demanded.

"Counterfeit," the young man answered. "As in fake. As in not real. Your friend here used a handful of it to buy this here transport."

Mal blinked in time to see Jayne round on him, face purple with anger. "You dumbass blog, you didn't check to make sure the cash was legit?" he barked.

Mal brought his teeth together with a menacing click. "Well I didn't see you exactly turnin' your nose up at the stuff when you were salvatin' over it in the cargo hold!" he snapped.

"You gan ni niang-"

"You have until sundown to return it." Both men turned furious gazes in the man's direction. He was watching them with irritatingly calm eyes.

"Or else what?" Mal snapped irritably. "You're going to stand there and look pretty at us?"

"This is the part where you fight back, right?" The young man's eyes lit up. He sounded far too eager for the situation. It put Mal's teeth on edge. "I love when they fight back."

"Weird ass, what's your problem?" Jayne griped, giving the interloper a once over.

"You dinged in the head or something? 'Cause, if so, I know a girl you should meet."

"Jayne," Mal warned under his breath.

"What?" Jayne protested. "Ain't like I'm lyin'. Girl's crac-" A loud crack cut off the rest of his sentence. "Ta ma de!" Jayne bellowed, stumbling backward as the young man's fist collided with his face. "What in hell-!"

"Let me make myself clear," the man explained. "My name is Louie Fingers, but around here, people just call me the Repo Man. And you are being repoed." He gave them a bright smile. "This isn't negotiable."

"Wo de ma, I'm gettin' just a mite tired of havin' my actions dictated by schoolboys," Mal growled.

"You ain't the one gettin' beat on!"

"Shut up, Jayne!" Mal jabbed a furious finger in Louie's direction. "Now I didn't know nothin' 'bout that money bein' funny, understand? Your boss wants to tear somebody a new one, he ought t'take it up with the gao yang jong duh goo yang what gave it to us in the first place!"

Louie moved lightning quick, delivering a punch to Mal that matched the one he'd given Jayne.

"*Hun dan, son of a whore...!*" Mal exclaimed, falling backwards across the Thoroughbred's front seat as Louie's fist connected with his cheekbone again. "Sundown," Louie repeated with a dangerous smile. "Or I come looking."

Mal clutched his face, watching with angry eyes as the young man walked away, disappearing into the dusty crowds. He barely even noticed when Jayne swung up into the back seat, until the mercenary jabbed him in the back of the head with an angry finger. "What?" the captain snapped, glaring over his shoulder. "You're buyin' my Ma new yarn," the other man growled. "Seein' as I've gotta take this back." He held up the bags of knitting supplies.

"Why're you takin' it back?" Mal sniped, turning on the Thoroughbred. It had such a nice, smooth engine.

"Cause I don't steal from little old ladies, all right?" Jayne groused.

"Y'steal from everybody else," Mal grumbled, pulling back into the traffic.



Wash grinned, watching River swinging happily on a nearby swing set. He hadn't seen her smile this much in a day in just about forever, he supposed. They'd spent all afternoon at the carnival, going on every ride, poking in every little trinket booth and buying the most appalling junk food imaginable. Simon was probably going to kill him for feeding his little sister a steady stream of funnel cakes, hot dogs, pizza, egg rolls, and ice cream, but River had loved every minute of it. Wash remembered Simon saying that she'd been taken to the Academy when she was fourteen.

Watching her today, it was easy to see that sweet little girl emerging from behind that trauma.

In fact, it kept pulling at his heartstrings, because he knew she wouldn't be this happy again anytime soon. Back on Serenity, she'd just be the doctor's crazy sister again. He didn't like that feeling much at all, but he couldn't do anything to change it. If Mal or Zoe found out about their little flying lessons, they'd both get the short stick, and River would probably be banned from the bridge indefinitely. He couldn't do that to her. She'd already given up so many things in her short life. One more secret on top of all the other ones she carried couldn't be too bad, especially not when it was a secret that gave her something to smile about.

Two figures seated themselves heavily on the bench on either side of him, and he glanced at them, startled. "Mal?" He looked to the other figure. "Jayne?" Then, taking in their matching swollen eyes, "I thought we weren't supposed to be having fights in our spare time. Have you been breaking your own rules again, Mal?"

The captain gave him a withering stare. "Did you buy anything?" he asked, voice clipped.

Wash eyed them warily. "Just admissions and food."

"Well, that can't be helped." Mal held out his hand. "Give me your money."

"Shouldn't one of you be holding a gun on me for that line to work?" Wash asked. "Why am I giving you my money?"

"Cause dumbass here didn't bother t'check if it was real or not, and turns out it ain't," Jayne grumbled.

"Ain't real?" Wash echoed. "Really?"

"No, we're lyin' to you," Mal deadpanned. "We just got these shiny matching bruises on account of they're all the rage in the Core."

"Well come to speak of it, the whole mottling thing does do wonders for your complexion."

"Look, shut up and give me the money. Don't want you spendin' it by accident. We've got till sundown to get the new Mule back to the dealer, or he's going to send out his muscle to break our kneecaps. And I don't really feel like having to fend the guy off, 'cause we've already met him."

"And he's crazy," Jayne added.

"Really?" Both men gave him matching glares, highlighted by their swollen eyes. "Right. Point taken."

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Not long after leaving Wash and River, Mal and Jayne nearly ran over Simon with the Thoroughbred.

"Watch where you're going, you..." Simon trailed off, when he looked up and saw who had nearly flattened him.

"You what?" Jayne growled. Between the Repo Man hitting him, and having to return the cash, he wasn't in a good mood.

"Never you mind that, Jayne. We ain't got the time to be takin' for a fight. 'Sides, who's gonna patch up the doctor?" Mal broke in. "Let me spell it out for you: The cash is counterfeit."

"It's what?" Simon bellowed.

"Gorram good impression of Jayne, there Doc, but seein' as you're all learned, I know you understand the meanin' of counterfeit. Give me what y'got on you. If you bought anything, return it and then get your learned ass back to Serenity and get your stash to me. We gotta find Kaylee before she buys the whole gorram dress store!" Mal rushed through the explanation, took the cash Simon handed him and then he and Jayne were gone, leaving Simon penniless in the dust.

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"I don't think I ever bought this much in my whole entire life, 'Nara!" Kaylee squealed as they emerged from yet another store, arms laden with packages. "I feel like one o' them fancy Core girls now, real and true!"

Inara laughed at her friend's excitement. "You're better than most of the Core girls I've met, Kaylee," she told the younger woman honestly.

"How so?" the mechanic asked, blushing but obviously pleased.

"Because you actually understand that having the luxury of money is something to be grateful for, not to be taken for granted." The Companion gave her young friend a warm smile. "You're a breath of fresh air in an otherwise cynical universe."

"S that what you mean when you say I ought t'be me best as I can be? You think Simon figures I'm a breath of fresh air?"

"More like a breath of perfume," Inara answered with a grin. "Smitten men tend to be fanciful."

"Inara!"

"Then there's the other kind, who are just irritating," she said with a falsely sweet smile, before turning on her heel to see Mal's head poking out of a glittering new Mule on the nearby road. "Oh merciful Buddha."

"What?" Kaylee asked, poking her head around Inara's shoulder. "Hey! Captain bought a new Mule! Oooh, ain't it shiny?"

"Lovely," Inara sighed. "I wonder who he had to kill to get it."

"Cap'n wouldn't do that," Kaylee chided.

"Then who gave him the swollen eye?" Gathering her skirts, Inara led the way through the crowds until they were standing beside the Thoroughbred.

"Give us your money," Mal grunted, holding out his hand. Seeing the packages heaped in their arms, he added, "And you're gonna have t'take all that back."

Inara could have punched him; if her hands hadn't been occupied with Kaylee's bags, she would have. She could literally feel the sensitive engineer's eyes flooding with tears. "Good afternoon to you, too, Mal," she said through gritted teeth. "To what do we owe this incredible displeasure?"

"Money's counterfeit," he muttered gruffly, looking like he wanted to get the conversation over as quickly as possible. "Gotta give back the new Tho- Mule and everythin' else."

"You mean... none of it were real?" The break in Kaylee's voice tore Inara's heart in half.

"Jayne, please tell me you're the one who punched him," the Companion snapped.

"I wish," the sullen mercenary griped from his position slumped in the passenger seat.

"Don't see why everyone's so intent on givin' me a lashin' over this," Mal protested angrily.

"Oh, give it a rest, Mal!" Inara exclaimed, losing her patience. She'd been tiptoeing around her frustration with the captain for long enough, and this was the breaking point. "We've already spent the money, in case you hadn't noticed. You just do whatever it is you do and let me take care of your mess, all right?"

Mal looked like he wanted to argue, but Inara wasn't in the mood. "Come on, Kaylee," she said, turning sharply, careful not to dislodge any of her packages. Giving the mechanic a gentle smile to take some of the sting out of her harsh words to Mal, she added, "You looked so pretty in that green dress, sweetie. Let me buy it for you. You can pay me back when Mal gets your money for you." Throwing a glance over her shoulder at the captain, she said, "Which he'll be doing soon, won't he?"

Mal's jaw was rigid, but he managed to grate out, "Course I will."

"Good." Turning back, Inara herded Kaylee back toward the store, leaving the two men in the shiny Mule behind.



By the time Mal and Jayne arrived at Lucky Jimmy's Dealership to return the Mule, Mal had already progressed through the Five Stages of Grieving once, only to begin the cycle all over again. He was currently on phase number two: Anger.

"Jayne?" he snarled as they pulled to a stop in front of the office.

"Yeah, Mal?"

"Stay here."

"Sure."

Swinging himself down from the Thoroughbred, Mal stalked toward the office, flung open the door, and stormed in. "Take your gorram Mule!" he shouted, slamming the keys down on the nearest desk. "It's a worthless piece of *le se* anyhow! Ain't like I'm partin' with nothin' special or anythin'!"

"Um... can I help you, sir?" the receptionist asked, staring at where his hand was still quivering over the keys on top of her desk.

Mal glared at her, then stabbed an irate finger in her face. "Now I know this ain't none of your doin', little missy, but I've just had 'bout the worst day-" He stopped, thought, and corrected himself. "One of the worst days of my lif-" He paused and rethought that. "One of the worst days of the past month or so, and I'm feelin' a mite put out, so just bear with, all right? I feel the need to ask a simple question. When a man does a job, and then gets paid, it's a fair bet that he should get paid in real cash money, right?"

"Um, yes?" the receptionist supplied.

"Right. So when the day comes that a man such as myself, who is not unsavvy in the ways of the 'verse and not unskilled in getting what he wants, has to specifically state that he expects to be paid in real cash money, it's got to signal the end of the world, right?"

"I... suppose?"

"All right, then. I just needed to say that before I went and skinned me some prissified schoolboys." Straightening up, Mal spun around and found himself face-to-face with Louie Fingers.

"You made it," he said with a bright smile that immediately disappeared.  
"Shame. I kind of wanted to smack you around some more."

Mal gave the man a brittle smile. "You'll excuse me if I don't apologize." Pushing past him, he headed for the door, but then stopped. Spinning back around, he stomped back over to the young man, grabbed him by the shoulder, spun him around, and landed a fist – right below his left eye.

"That's for bein' a loony, whacked out, psycho son of a bitch," he snapped as the younger man hit the floor, clutching his face. "You ain't right in the head. But trust me, I know crazy. And you? You ain't crazy. You're just really, really weird."

Giving the man a kick for good measure, he whirled away and marched out the door.

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Simon had no shopping bags. He knew they'd never think he'd keep anything back, but he was not returning the locket he bought for River or the pendant he found for Kaylee. It was perfect for her, being the shape of a wrench.

Simon bumped into Inara on his way back to Serenity.

"I take it you heard?" he stated amicably.

"He never learns things can't be easy for him and still end good," Inara sighed. "Inara, can I ask your opinion on something?" he asked. "I found this pendant for Kaylee and this locket for River. You think they'll like them? You're a woman; you think they're okay gifts? I haven't given River anything since before the Academy – excepting the drugs. And the pendant just called Kaylee's name." He never gave her a chance to answer – just rushed to get his words out, showing her the jewelry carefully.

Inara smiled at him. "They're beautiful. And yes, this pendant calls out for Kaylee. They both will love them because you gave them the gift, Simon." Inara never let it show that she thought the locket was too young for River. Simon still saw her as the little sister he left behind to attend medical school or the crazy person the Alliance had turned her into. He never saw the person she was or the woman she was becoming.

"Thank you, Inara." Simon hurried on to Serenity, hiding the gifts away in his vest pocket again. Inara shook her head thoughtfully, and headed towards a café – she had an appointment to keep.



Mal was already on the bridge when Wash and River returned to Serenity. "Husband, I'd stay away from the bridge, if I was you," Zoe warned.

"Mal is Mal." River nodded with wide eyes. "Mal, not good."

"River, you manage to keep my husband out of trouble?" Zoe asked, changing the topic.

"Wash is no trouble." River answered, looking the most lucid Zoe had seen her in a while. River wore a big smile. "Was a girl, not broken. Lots of fun was had by all."

"Good to hear," Zoe replied, appraisingly looking from Wash to River.

River knew Simon was already on board, so she started toward the passenger rooms. She turned back at the cargo hold entrance. "Thank you, Wash."

Wash grinned as she ran off to find Simon. "Even after the counterfeiting mess, we had fun."

"Husband, you did very good today," Zoe spoke, smiling indulgently at him.

"I had a slinky dress all picked out for you, lamb chops. But then the money was fake," Wash pouted.

"It's all right. You gave River an afternoon as a girl. It's good seein' her so happy," Zoe told him. "Always knew you were good with children. Think we should head to our quarters? Mal's gonna be awhile – a long while. Who really needs a slinky dress that just ends up in a heap on the floor?"

Wash was leading the way back to their quarters a second later with a big, shit-eating grin on his face. "Lamb chops, I'm thinking, we ain't needing a slinky dress."

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"River?" Simon poked his head into his sister's room to find her curled up on her bed, drawing. "May I come in?"

River looked up from her sketchpad, giving him a brilliant smile. It was so unexpected he had to blink, but he quickly found himself grinning in return. "Come in!" she chimed, sitting up so she was kneeling on the bed, eagerly gesturing for him to enter.

"I take it you had a fun time with Wash today?" he asked, moving into the room, sitting on the edge of the bed.

River nodded, propping herself up against the wall, twirling her hair around her finger. "Examined the physics of the trampoline," she said, ticking the items off on one hand. "Ate sugar. Decimated the pilot at bumper cars, though he was a worthy adversary. Had a hot dog." She wrinkled her nose at him. "Never again. Strange pieces of pork-like matter stuffed into a tube. Though flavorful."

Simon laughed. "I'm glad you had fun, mei mei," he told her honestly. It was wonderful, seeing her smile. "Did you keep Wash out of trouble?"

River gave him a crooked smile. "Helped him win a stuffed beagle for Zoe. He was appreciative."

"I'm sure he was." Simon's hand fluttered towards his pocket, then away again, then back.

"Do you have a gift for me, Simon?" He jumped a little at her unexpected intrusion into his thoughts. She blinked at him, her face a blank mask of innocence.

"Well... Yes, actually," he admitted. "It just... seems a bit silly now."

"Please?" She held out her hand.

Reaching into his pocket, Simon fingered the plain box that housed the locket before slowly drawing it out and placing it in her palm. River brought it up to her face, holding it close to her eyes as if examining the molecules that composed the cardboard, then carefully tugged off the lid, setting it neatly aside. Poking at the soft cotton batting inside, she pulled it aside with one finger, peering down into the box.

"I realize it's a bit childish," Simon explained in a rush as she pulled the cotton out completely and stuck two fingers into the box to withdraw the locket. It was shaped

like a heart, with the letter R engraved on the front cover, strung on a delicate golden chain. "I guess I just... can't help myself. You're still my little sister, even if you're growing like a weed."

River gave him a reproachful look. "Not a weed. A flower." A small smile twitched on her lips as she ran her thumb over the engraving.

"I know you don't wear jewelry," Simon explained. He was beginning to wonder why he'd even bought her the locket in the first place. She didn't wear jewelry; the gift probably made her feel like a child.

"Simon." He blinked and looked up quickly, to find her giving him that smile she reserved for when he was being incredibly stupid. "It's just a locket, not a chastity belt."

He blushed bright red. He could feel his ears flaming. "I wish you wouldn't do that, *mei mei*," he murmured self-consciously, looking away.

River leaned forward across her sketchpad, wrapping an arm around his neck in a loving hug. "Thank you," she said. "It's very pretty."

Simon smiled, returning the hug. "I thought it only right to give you something," he told her. "We've been here for months, and I haven't given you anything but medication."

"A welcome home present."

Simon felt his smile grow. He hadn't thought of it like that, but now that she said it, he realized she was right. "Yes, *mei mei*," he agreed. Rubbing her back, he kissed her forehead and pulled away. "Welcome home."

River giggled, turning away, fishing underneath her pillow with one hand.

"What are you doing, River?" Simon asked, squinting at her actions.

"Got you a welcome home present, too," she grunted, before grinning excitedly and sitting up straight again, one hand held behind her back. "The eyes must be closed for surprises to work," she told him solemnly.

Simon laughed softly, closing his eyes, holding out his hands. "Is this all right?" "Yes." Something light and nearly weightless was laid across his palms. "Look now."

Simon opened his eyes and beamed.

She had given him a journal. It was long and thin, and an obnoxious yellow and purple lion that must have been a popular cartoon character on the Cortex dominated the cover. The pages were a multi-hued assortment of pastels that ranged the rainbow from pink to yellow to baby blue. It even came with an attached pen that was thick and chunky and had a tuft of fake purple feathers jutting out of the cap.

"You like books. Now you can write our story, Simon," River told him with a little nod of approbation. "Much more interesting than pulp fiction." She tilted her head in an appraising motion. "There was little selection at the carnival." She reached out a

finger to idly play with the puff of feathers.

Simon grinned at her. "Thank you, River. I love it."

"It's purple."

"So I see."

"It was all they had," she added, chewing on her lip.

He gave her a mischievous smile. "With such fine merchandise, why bother with selection?"

"You really like it?"

She sounded so insecure that he had to reach across and give her another hug. "Yes, River," he reassured her, and meant it. "I love it." Sitting back again, he ran a thoughtful hand along the journal's spiral binding. "River?"

"Yes, Simon?"

"You realize the money was counterfeit, right?"

"Yes."

"You should have returned this. I appreciate the gift, but you should have returned it when you found out."

River shook her head. "Not bought with illegal funds," she told him.

Simon tilted his head curiously. "Then how?"

She smiled at him. "Pocket money."

"Pocket - Who gives you pocket money, River?"

She shrugged, sitting back against the wall, swinging the locket in front of her eyes, like a hypnotist. "Inara," she murmured. "Kaylee. Zoe. Wash. The preacher. They feel sorry for me. Think they can buy happiness." She smiled at him. "Give me tidbits."

Simon laughed softly, moving to lean against the wall beside her. "You really are a brat, aren't you?"

"I'm sweet."

"Of course you are."

"Where did you get the money for my shiny neck ornament?"

Simon blanched. "I... didn't," he admitted, giving her a nervous little smile. "I just didn't take it back."

River beamed at him. "You did crime!" She reached out and patted his hair. "You're beginning to fit in."

"Please don't remind me."

River giggled. "Welcome home, Simon," she said.

Simon smiled at her. "Welcome home, River."

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Mal spent his time on the bridge tracking the bastards down. It wasn't too hard – they had actually used their real names. Finding where they lived didn't take a genius either. Conveniently, the three counterfeiters were living together in the same house.

Mal had a little plan all set to steal the Lassiter back. This time he stuck with something simple: they'd watch a bit, get the lay of the land, and take out the three men, and take back the Lassiter. Mal was against a fancy plan. There was less to screw up that way. Their luck wasn't up to anything overreaching. They would be fortunate if something this simple would go their way. He wasn't even going to ponder how badly they could screw this up.

With both Inara and Book gone in the shuttles, Mal was forced to use Serenity instead. It wasn't a problem, but the Firefly was a little more conspicuous than the shuttle would have been.

Mal flew Serenity. Wash was with Zoe, in their bunk, and the job didn't require any expertise flying, yet. He needed the peace flying Serenity always gave. He had a lot of malicious thoughts to work out, and flying would help. He set Serenity down about a mile from the house the counterfeiters called home, and only then did he call the crew together in the cargo hold.

"Now this is how it's gonna go. Zoe, Jayne and me are heading due west, about a mile, on foot. We'll be takin' our property back. We'll observe some, and as soon as we see our opportunity, we'll take it. We ain't gonna be but a hard run from you here. But, I'm expectin' a little resistance, and Wash, I want you waiting with Serenity ready. Might be needing you to get us en route. There ain't no fancy-pants plan. We ain't been havin' the best o'luck with them, these days. Ain't gonna chance it now. And we ain't got no time for missin' what we ain't got no longer."

He eyed his crew before nodding. "Everyone ready?"

Each one of them was bitter over having to return their purchased goods, and they all wanted revenge. Jayne cocked his gun and aimed it experimentally at the cargo bay doors. "Let's go get 'em."

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"Just once it'd be nice if things would go according to the plan! This one was even extra simple!" Mal cursed when one of the counterfeiters came waltzing into the

room where, he, Jayne, Zoe and the Lassiter were.

"That's the problem with crime, sir," Zoe deadpanned. "Unpredictable."

"What the-!" was Wembley's only sound before Jayne slipped up behind him, silencing him with a chop to the back of his scrawny, lilly-white neck. Wembley would wake in a few hours having gained a powerful ache in his head, and lost the Lassiter. "This gorram thing ain't hardly worth the sweat!" Jayne whined. "I ain't even got t'kill no body yet!"

"Really is it too much to ask to be paid in real money?" Mal went on lamenting, ignoring Jayne. "I gotta be saying 'you pay me in real credits', now too? Man's got enough to do stayin' a gorram step ahead of everyone gunnin' for him and now I gotta be watchin' for go se coin?"

Zoe snatched up the case containing the Lassiter. After checking that the gun was inside, she looked over to Mal. "Sir, think this plan is going smooth enough that you can shut up, now."

Mal scowled at her, but when she thrust the Lassiter into his arms and moved around to lead the way out of the house, Mal realized she was right, and broke into a grin.

"Jayne, tie him up," he directed, pointing at Wembley with his gun. He nodded to Zoe. "Shall we go pay the other boys a visit?"

Zoe nodded, and the two of them left Jayne to the task, while they slipped out of the back room, seeking the other two men.

Ricky and Leonard were watching a sports program on the Cortex when Zoe and Mal burst in on them from behind. With guns drawn, there was no resistance. "Hello, boys," Mal cheerfully said. "Just thought we'd drop by and liberate some of our property." He dangled the case containing the Lassiter at them.

Ricky scowled, but faced with the nozzles of two guns, he didn't move. "We paid fair and square for that!" Ricky protested.

Mal's eyes narrowed. He stalked forward and backhanded Ricky in the face with his revolver. Ricky dropped to his knees, watching his blood drip down his nose. "Counterfeit coin ain't legit, boys. Think that's a lesson ya'll best be learnin'."

Jayne sauntered into the room, dusting his hands. "Pasty one's all hogtied." He eyed the other two men. "Guess I got t'get me some more rope."

"Please don't kill us!" Leonard pleaded.

Zoe kneed Leonard in the gut, then dropped him to his knees beside Ricky. "Would be a mercy, if we did," she said.

Mal inclined his head, agreeing. "Would be, but we ain't. Instead, we're gonna tie you up, and let the proper authorities deal with you." He stepped aside so Jayne could start the process.

"You aren't sympathetic to the Feds!" Ricky protested. "Why would you turn us in?"

Mal switched the Cortex link off the sports station and brought up the communications channel, ignoring Ricky. He pinged in Louie Finger's repossession service and donned a saccharine smile when Louie's face appeared. "Got some folks what y'might like t'beat up a bit," he cheerfully said before swiveling the monitor so the camera picked up the two counterfeiters on the floor. "All pretty and wrapped in bows, even."

When Jayne finished tying the two men up, Mal gestured for the three of them to take off. He leaned his face into the Cortex monitor. "Happy hunting," he said, then waved to the two men, and then they slipped out the way they'd come in.

There was no trouble getting back to Serenity, which was a welcomed relief. Wash flew them back to the West Docks to wait for Book and Inara to return – the opposite side of town from the counterfeiter's house. Mal wasn't terribly comfortable staying planet-side, but it wasn't like he could leave his crew or passengers behind. There was also no use in calling Inara back, saying they'd be leaving sooner than expected, at least not until Book was back. They were just going to have to hide out and trust that Louie would take care of their counterfeiter problem.

Mal wasn't going to have a problem with Jayne killing them if they tried to come back for the goods. The recovery plan had gone smoothly, but Mal was still on guard for a return attack, and since they had to wait until Book and Inara returned, he wasn't going to count the mission as a success, not yet.

He was surprised when Inara's shuttle docked a few hours later. She'd returned almost fourteen hours earlier than planned.



Inara knew Mal would wanted to leave the planet as soon as possible, so she'd cancelled the appointment she'd made for the following day and returned to Serenity. She didn't know that Book's absence would keep the grounded, anyway.

Inara sat staring at the empty vid screen in her shuttle after she had returned. Her plans were set. In just a few weeks she'd be at the training house with Sheydra, molding the Companions of the future. She'd finally be putting some of her past to good, using her multitude of skills to better others, instead of letting them flounder our in the Black.

The training house was a place she wouldn't be called a whore, or stabbed in the heart by callous words. She wouldn't be fighting with Mal anymore, nor wanting to strangle him. She wouldn't be near him, or have to hear his voice or watch him. There would be no more ignoring her training and being reduced to the sad, bitter woman she was watching herself become everyday in the mirror.

All she had left to do was to tell the crew, and find a way to properly word this goodbye. She couldn't just slink off one day and never return. She owed Kaylee better than that, at least, and River, too. She also had to give the girls their gifts: she had bought a parasol to go with the dress Kaylee had fallen in love with, it also had strawberry trim on the green apple paper. River would need something to put the locket in, and Inara had found the perfect polished wooden box for her.

She had to tell Mal when his shuttle would be free to rent, and give her two-week notice.

Still, she had several weeks yet. She was bound to think of the proper way to depart between then and now.

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Wash and River were on the bridge, watching an old broadwave of Jason and the Argonauts on the Cortex. River was having a hard time settling in, even though the 20th century film had lulled Wash off to sleep. The thoughts and residual emotions from the crew were not letting River rest tonight. Some thoughts were the left over anger from Mal; some were left over restlessness from Book. Inara's early return compounded River's restlessness as the Companion faced making a choice, but then Inara's tensions settled once she chose her path.

"Ghosts walk this ship," she whispered. "Some peaceful, some violent. Not all belong to Mal."